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PLANS AND ATTITUDES OF WINTER VEGETABLE GROWERS
IN THE IMPERIAL VALLEY

The following is a summary received from our interviewer surveying the Imperial Valley winter vegetable area.

Vegetable growing in general in the Imperial Valley is considered an expensive enterprise, and a gamble. For that reason, it is controlled mostly by large packer-grower-shippers who own or lease large acreages, and have their own sheds for packing and shipping. These shippers have considerable capital behind them which is either in the hands of the owner-managers, or in companies which control similar operations in other parts of California or Arizona. Thus, most of the vegetable-growing is on a large-scale, highly mechanized basis.

Figures on the 1943 acreages show that of total acreages, the following amounts have been planted by independent growers:

Lettuce	7%
Carrots	18
Cabbage	17
Peas	3
Cantaloupe	15

The independent growers are, on the whole, Filipino, Hindu, Mexican, and formerly the Japanese who plant small acreages. These small growers with their five to 20 acre tracts are able to stay in business because they supply their own stoop labor. But the average sized, general farmer can neither perform his own stoop labor, nor does he have the capital to tide him over bad years or the facilities for shipping his vegetables. He must ship his vegetables through the sheds owned by the shipper-growers who make it even more difficult for the independent grower because if the market is good, they are unwilling to use their packing facilities for an outsider, and he is often forced to have his shipping performed when the market is low. Thus, the average-sized farmer in this area looks to more stable enterprises such as flax, sugar beets and alfalfa.

The Imperial Valley is enjoying a generally prosperous season this year, and the farmers are optimistic about enjoying prosperity for the duration of the war. Good farmland is very much in demand, rents have gone up, and land inflation is on its way. Much of this activity is a result of the fabulous prices which have been

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received for melons (both watermelon and cantaloupe) and lettuce. Fortunes have been made on these crops, and both local farmers and interests from other parts of the state (mainly Salinas) and the east are trying to join the bandwagon and make money from these crops next year. There is practically a gold-rush on. And this is in the face of the Government's policy last year of attempting to discourage these non-essential crops, in favor of essential vegetables like carrots, cabbage and tomatoes. Early carrots and early tomatoes brought satisfactory prices, but the market for late crops of both these vegetables have failed. Melon and lettuce growers were threatened with extreme curtailment of the necessary materials, labor and transportation, but they have been rewarded with a fair supply of these necessities as well as a very high ceiling price on the lettuce, and none at all on the melons, while acres of carrots and tomato crops are not even being harvested. An oft-quoted statement is that if you want to make money on farming, the best thing to do is to oppose the Government's policies. Such an attitude has found fertile soil in a community which has a long tradition of emphasis on individualistic enterprise. Furthermore, any patriotic appeal, which refraining from planting the non-essential crops may have had, has been nullified by the fact that the Army has been the best customer in the purchase of lettuce and melons.

To discuss specific crops in some detail:

Lettuce: During the 1941-1942 season 20,000 acres of lettuce were grown in the Imperial Valley. This was reduced to 17,500 in the 1942-1943 season as a result of the Government program in regard to non-essential crops. However, estimates for 1943-44 run from 20,000 to 30,000 acres. Lettuce growers have received high prices. They have been encouraged by the Army consumption of lettuce, and they anticipate another year of high demand. The only loss which occurred in the lettuce last year was because of inadequate transportation. This loss was so minor that it looks like a good gamble again next year. The deterrents to increased acreages are, however, the usual fears of shortages in transportation, shock, and phosphate fertilizer and, more important, the limit to the supply of desirable land. Of the vegetable growers to whom I talked, all are planning to retain at least their same acreages in lettuce, and two are planning a 25 percent increase in their acreages. However, it is generally conceded that many new growers will enter the field. To what extent, I could not estimate on the basis of this survey.

Carrots: The general picture of the carrot situation in the Imperial Valley seems to be this: Last fall an announcement came out of the office of the Food Production Administration saying that carrots were to be considered an essential crop; the growers of carrots would be guaranteed supplies, transportation and growing costs; and the farmers were urged to plant carrots in place of crops which were considered non-essential - melons and lettuce -

and which would not be assured anything in the way of supplies, labor or transportation. Growers responded to this request by increasing their carrot acreages from 6300 to 8900 acres. Carrots suitable for bunching and fresh market use were planted. Early in the season the market was good, and carrots brought a satisfactory price. Then both fresh market and Army consumption began to fall off. By April it was apparent that there would be a surplus of carrots here. A meeting was held with the State War Board, a representative of the FPA, and representatives of the local growers. An arrangement was made whereby the FPA was to authorize dehydrators to purchase the carrots for dehydration at \$23 a ton. Because apparently of inadequate contracts having been made with the dehydrators, their purchases were delayed and finally in June they offered some of the farmers \$17 a ton for their carrots.* FDA has also made some attempts to relieve the market, but their purchases have done little material good. The outcome of the situation is that some \$80,000 loss has been suffered by the carrot growers, and irreparable damage has been done to morale with respect to cooperation with the Government's war-time agricultural programs.

With this history, it is apparent that the carrot acreage will be reduced next year. Large growers are contemplating variable decreases, some in the neighborhood of 25 percent while small growers have been frightened off the market entirely. (Of course, it may be to the advantage of the large growers to maintain substantial acreages of carrots as a respectably essential crop in order to put more pressure behind their demands upon the War Board for machinery, if they wish to maintain their production of melons and lettuce.)

Peas: Most of the peas are grown in a relatively small area around Calipatria by four or five large growers. Here I talked to one grower who plants about two-thirds of the Valley's entire acreage, and another grower who divides his major interests between peas and flax. Both are extremely disturbed by the reduction of the tariff on Mexican peas (it was cut from 3.9 cents to 2.0 cents per lb.), and feel that they do not dare gamble on peas next year because they fear the competition which Mexican labor will offer. Their own labor situation is quite uncertain because of the difficulty of obtaining pea-pickers, and this, added to transportation uncertainties makes the gamble even less inviting. The larger grower expects to cut his acreage almost in half, while the other grower is maintaining the same acreage. Still another grower, whose

* But by this time the carrots were rotting and going to seed. The harvesting season for carrots in Imperial Valley is over by June. The farmers have been unable to meet the requirements of the dehydration specifications with respect to quality because of the lateness of the season, and with respect to size because they had not planted their crops with large-size dehydration-vegetables in mind.

company also has interests in Mexican peas, merely states that peas are now "out" in the Imperial Valley. The company owns Mexican land and is planting peas there this year instead of in the Imperial Valley in order to take advantage of cheaper production in Mexico.) The one grower who is maintaining the same acreage feels that he can do this only because he has more stable crops (flax, alfalfa) to fall back on if the peas fail. The larger grower intends to diversify his farming more. His plans are not definite, but it seems probable that he can expect to make money from melons, so some of the land will be used for that purpose.

When asked what could be done to encourage the continuance of pea production, their strongest request is that the tariff should be restored. They just don't know what to expect in the amount, or cost of the Mexican peas, and that makes other uncertainties seem negligible. However, they admit that some encouragement might be afforded if they were guaranteed shock for packing, and had definite assurances regarding transportation. One grower suggested that lifting of price ceilings might help, while another thought that something in the way of a price floor might remove some of the fears regarding next year's market.

Cantaloupe: Fabulously high prices are being received for cantaloupe now. They range from \$4.50 to \$6.00 a crate. Here again, the large growers are intending to maintain the same acreages because they anticipate good prices and an active market next year. And for that same reason, other growers are expecting to enter the market. To what extent, it would be difficult to estimate. (In April, the County Labor Committee anticipated a 25 percent increase.) They follow the same reasoning as with the lettuce. The Army is making large purchases, people want cantaloupe and they are going to grow it. They have apparently suffered no losses (or only occasional slight ones) because of transportation, and their chief worry has been to obtain enough shock to crate the melons. With considerable worry, they have been able to do this. Thus they have felt the impact of none of the threats which the Government issued regarding cantaloupe growing.

Watermelon: Although I have not talked to the watermelon growers as extensively as to other vegetable growers, it seems apparent that their path will be the same as the cantaloupe growers. They too are making fortunes with watermelons at unprecedented high prices. They are, of course, paying high wages and they have complained because they have had to use "anything" in the way of transportation - box-cars, cattle cars, etc., rather than ventilated or refrigerated cars. But this has not interfered with the market or with their profits. They look upon watermelon as a good investment for next year. Outside money is being attracted to watermelon-growing, and it leads in the ranks of the get-rich-quick crops.

Tomatoes: Contradictory pictures are presented regarding the plans for next year's tomatoes. In the northern part of the Valley around Niland where the climate favors early tomatoes, several new growers are entering the tomato business next year with fairly large acreages of 100 to 200 acres each. A good price was enjoyed for early tomatoes, and many growers are going ahead on the basis of this encouragement. Late tomatoes, however, have met with a poor market because they have had competition from Texas tomatoes, and many of the tomato crops are not being harvested because of the low price which they are bringing - \$1.25, \$1.50 per crate. The only ones who have been able to continue to sell at this price are the Filipino growers who provide their own labor. It appears that the small Filipino acreages will continue at the same level, even though they may have suffered a bad market for late tomatoes both this year and last. In a less intense way than with carrots, the failure of the late tomato market and the loss of money on tomatoes which were classed as an essential crop, has served to further undermine the confidence in the Government's program of essential and non-essential crops.

Cabbage: Because of the good market enjoyed by cabbage during the past year, it is generally anticipated that there will be an appreciable increase in cabbage plantings. It is apparently the one essential crop that people consistently made money on, although they state that the reason is largely because the Texas crop failed. Some of the more cagey, larger growers are going to decrease their crops because they anticipate an over-production of cabbage. However, the one strong limiting factor is the availability of cabbage seed. Cabbage seed is selling at \$10 a pound. And one local seed dealer said that he had been informed that it would be impossible for him to obtain any seed. Some of the growers already have seed on hand, but those who wish to start cabbage production are going to be stymied at the outset.

Asparagus: Of the 260 acres of asparagus in the Valley, most of it can be expected to remain in good condition, but a decrease in total acreage is anticipated. The situation hinges on the difficulty of obtaining skilled labor to harvest it. Much of this year's crop has not been harvested because of this difficulty. Thus, marginal-producing beds can be expected to be abandoned and not replaced, and the total harvest will decrease as the labor difficulties increase.

Other vegetables: The general talk is that now is the time to grow vegetables. Growers are experimenting with small acreages of new vegetables and tentatively increasing their acreages of minor crops. Two large growers are doubling their experimental acreages of endive. Egg-plant and squash brought good prices last year, and look like a good bet for next year. The first celery plantings have proven successful, and a few plan to experiment with that. Root vegetables are occasionally mentioned as one of the things people are trying out. In April the County Labor Committee estimated that the

broccoli acreage would be increased from 185 to 700 acres, and romaine - "a new crop which grows well here and struck a good market" - is expected to increase to 300 to 800 acres from a previously negligible amount. Onions, for seed purposes, are being grown for Lend-lease contracts in increasing amounts.

Production needs: There is a general apprehension regarding the availability of supplies for the coming year. Because of this (plus lack of information regarding the Government's policies) many of the growers do not feel that they can state definitely what their plans are for the next season's plantings.

The most frequently mentioned need is for shock. The cry throughout the Valley is for more shock and for assurances that they will be able to get it next year. Planters of essential carrots claimed that they didn't get it and that the lettuce and melon growers did. The greatest hardship has been felt by the independent farmer who is not an old established customer of the Box companies. It is undoubtedly true that Box companies have held a great deal of power in their hands in the distribution of shock, and they have favored those who could bring them the best financial returns.

The next most frequently voiced problem concerns labor. There is a fair supply of unskilled labor here because of the importation of Mexican Nationals, but any sort of skilled labor is of course a real problem, whether it be pea-pickers or asparagus-cutters or tractor drivers. And, of course, there is a universal complaint about having to pay high wages. The growers here realize that they are extremely dependent on Mexican labor, and that they would be completely devastated if this supply were cut off. So, even though their labor supply may have been adequate in the past season, they are still jittery about what the future may bring.

Both railroad transportation and trucking are chronic headaches, and are factors causing uncertainty in the future plans. Thus far the needs have been met by hook or by crook. Growers are concerned, of course, as they see rubber tires wear out and wonder if they can be replaced, and they are delayed because of trucking difficulties. With perishable crops such as lettuce and melons, slight delays in railroad transportation can be ruinous. So far, the losses because of transportation difficulties have been very short, but it is an unknown that adds to the hazards of the future, and is mentioned by over one-fourth of the people I interviewed as a real problem to them.

In general, the people I interviewed have said that they have been able to keep their machinery in fairly good repair, and they seem adequately supplied for the present. However, about one-fourth of them look upon their machinery as a real problem in next season's plans. Representatives of the War Board say that

the big problem here is that of obtaining the large crawler-type tractors which are so necessary in an area where the farming is highly mechanized and is performed on a large-scale basis. They complain of having had great difficulty in convincing Washington officials of the unique needs of this area, and constantly complain that Washington thinks the Middle West and the West are exactly the same in regard to planting time, crops and production needs.

Although but a few of the farmers themselves look upon the fertilizer supply as a real handicap in their plans for the future, county officials state that it is a source of real concern to them, since the soil in this valley simply cannot go on producing without a phosphate supplement. It is interesting to note that there seems to be less complaint about the distribution of fertilizer to essential rather than to non-essential crops than there has been concerning any other aspect of the "essential-non-essential" program. Perhaps this is the reason why the farmers refer to it less frequently as a problem. If they didn't get it for their non-essential crops, that was what they should have expected. And as a whole, they were able to get it for essential crops.

When I asked the growers if they would like to see any more Government control of supplies, there was almost a clean split between the independent growers and the grower-shippers. Most of the independent growers asked for greater Government control of supplies, and the shippers opposed such a measure. Some didn't care how it was handled, as long as they got more supplies. The reason for the split is obvious. The grower-shippers are old, established, well-paying customers of the shook-and-fertilizer people, and thus they have had the inside-track in obtaining supplies while the small farmer just didn't stand a chance in competing with them to get scarce materials so he is asking for more Government protection.

Attitudes toward Government price controls: The most characteristic feeling in this area is that the Government should take its hands off, and let the law of supply and demand be the only guide posts for farm production. And that is what might be expected considering that markets are generally good now for farm products. There is practically no concern about the spiral of inflation, and this season's experiences have done a lot to boost a boom-time outlook.

Experiences with price ceilings on vegetables have been fairly satisfactory, largely of course, because the ceilings have been placed at a high level, oftentimes at a level which was reached only briefly during the marketing period. In describing their attitudes toward price ceilings, there is no characteristic

pattern of reaction, but rather several qualifications. Some are simply satisfied with the way the ceilings have been handled, but prefer a laissez-faire policy. Others state that it's all right to have price ceilings, but there should also be ceilings on the costs of production, particularly wages. Still others say that it's all right to have ceilings if there's also a floor. Of those who are unqualifiedly in favor of ceilings, one is a small unsuccessful farmer who simply thought that people shouldn't have to pay so much for their vegetables, and another was a large, prosperous cantaloupe-lettuce producer who felt that stringent ceilings would keep small producers from entering the market and spoiling it, and would allow only the more efficient operators to remain. Those who are flatly opposed to ceilings simply prefer a laissez-faire policy, and feel that they should be allowed to make all the money they can.

In an attempt to predict what the effect would be of having ceilings on some vegetables and not on others, the most frequent reaction seemed to be that it would have no effect, in general, though it would depend on what ceilings on which vegetables. The ceilings have been high enough to allow an adequate margin of profit, so that the farmer would produce his customary crops in all probability. A small fraction of them thought there would be a greater acreage of non-ceilinged crops.

Little thought has been given to price floors, probably because the markets generally have been good. Thus the immediate reaction to such a proposal was usually that it would be an unnecessary Governmental interference, and they would again reply that they preferred to leave things to the law of supply and demand. A few thought that if there were to be ceilings, there should also be floors. A few others were definitely in favor of the protection afforded by floors.

The feeling about subsidies is much the same as that about floors, probably because there isn't much distinction between them in the way the farmers look at them. Most opinions were definitely against them, while some accepted them conditionally. They would be willing to take the money from a subsidy, but would prefer adequate prices.

As for attitudes regarding the desirability of a Governmental program regarding acreages, any opposition to such a program which may have existed beforehand has of course been intensified by the experiences with the carrot fiasco during the past season. Some based their opposition entirely on the basis of the past season's experiences, while the majority based their opposition on a blanket preference for the law of supply and demand. However, a sizeable minority feel that if such a policy is a war-time necessity, they are willing to go along with it, but they need to be convinced that it is a war-time necessity by some consistency in policy. I pursued the subject further to see what suggestions might be offered as to how they thought the Government could most successfully encourage the production of certain crops. About a fourth of those interviewed said, "just remove the ceilings", while an equal number said, "Just furnish all the supplies we need, and we'll do the rest".

A few clung tenaciously to the proposal that it would still work out if they just left things to the law of supply and demand. One suggested having a bonus, or subsidy for essential crops. Another suggested that there should be a local buyer here to contract it from the growers. Another suggestion was that the Government should state a minimum requirement of the "essential" crops, let a local board distribute the acreages among the growers, and leave the rest of their plantings up to their own discretion. There were quite frequent demands for greater local representation in the planning of governmental policies because of the strong feeling that a centralized control fails to understand the peculiarities of the local requirements and problems. The War Board, too, feels that greater respect should be given the local decisions, rather than having their requests delayed and refused by a centralized board. Also, the farmers constantly demand that the Government's policies be stated sufficiently in advance for them to be able to make their plans accordingly, and then they want to be able to depend upon the Government's statement of policy.

Recommendations: After the complete failure of the systems of rewards and punishments which were supposed to encourage essential crops and discourage non-essential ones, certainly little can be expected in the way of voluntary cooperation with a statement of policy for the coming year. If, in the broad picture of Governmental planning, it is necessary to encourage the production of certain crops and discourage the production of others on the basis of transportation shortages and nutritional needs, this policy must be made definite and consistent. It must state to what extent the less-essential crops are to be curtailed, and to what extent they are to be allowed to obtain necessary materials for production.

However, such a statement of policy is absolutely useless unless there is some intention of enforcement. And in such an enforcement policy, the Government must be prepared to cope not with small farmers, but with the large business enterprises which dominate the winter-vegetable growing, and which have considerable financial and political power behind them.

In order to regain some of the confidence which has been lost during this past season, it is essential that there be more contact and cooperation with local representatives. And there should be no announcement of policies unless it can be seen quite clearly that they can be effectively enforced. If they intend to control supplies for certain crops, they must not permit the packers to buy off the supply companies. If melons are announced as a non-essential crops, there should certainly be some coordination with the quartermasters of the Army, because huge Army purchases of "non-essential" foods completely destroys any belief in the statement that they are non-essential. But, of course, the obviously most important requirement

for any support of a Government program is that those who support it make money and those who do not are not allowed to profiteer. The situation, as it has been allowed to develop in the Imperial Valley has been a complete failure in this respect and has served to irreparably undermine confidence in the Government's war-time planning policies.

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